

RESEARCH BRIEF

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A Research Brief
from the *Study of
California's Transitional
Kindergarten Program*

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Transitional Kindergarten in California

Comparing Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten Classrooms

Introduction

The rollout of the Kindergarten Readiness Act has given rise to questions about how transitional kindergarten (TK) is being implemented in districts throughout California—that is, what happens in TK classrooms, and how is it different from kindergarten classrooms? Districts and schools are given considerable flexibility in how they implement TK, so some variability is to be expected. Given this flexibility, and given that state law guides TK programs to use a modified kindergarten curriculum and a developmentally appropriate approach, it is interesting to examine if and how TK provides a different educational experience than traditional kindergarten.

About the Study

With support from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted the first year of the statewide *Study of California's Transitional Kindergarten Program* to describe the program as it was implemented across California in the 2012–13 school year, the program's first year of statewide implementation.¹

Purpose of This Research Brief

This second research brief in a series highlighting findings from the study focuses on characteristics of TK classrooms compared with those of kindergarten classrooms.²

What is TK?

In 2010, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act (SB 1381) into law. The law changed the kindergarten entry cutoff so that children must turn five by September 1 (instead of December 2) to enter kindergarten. The law specified a phase-in period for the new age requirement by moving the cutoff date back one month each year for three years beginning in the 2012–13 school year. SB 1381 also established a new grade level—Transitional Kindergarten (TK)—which is the first year of a two-year kindergarten experience for students who turn five between September 2 and December 2. SB 1381 also specified that the new grade level be taught by credentialed teachers using a modified kindergarten curriculum that is developmentally appropriate. When fully implemented, TK is intended to provide an additional year of early education for these children, with the goal of promoting their success in school.

¹ A full copy of the final report is available at <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/about-the-study/reports>.

² In this brief, the term “TK” refers to transitional kindergarten classrooms as implemented under SB 1381, “kindergarten” refers to traditional kindergarten classrooms, and “TK combination” refers to classrooms with both TK and kindergarten students.

Methodology

As part of the larger study, AIR surveyed TK teachers and kindergarten teachers from a sample of elementary schools in California ($n=151$) to gather information on teaching practices. Surveys were administered electronically.³ The team also conducted in-depth case studies of nine districts to better understand TK planning, communication, and implementation processes at the district and school levels, as well as contextual factors that affected implementation. These data have been used to supplement survey data analyses.

How Do TK Classrooms Compare With Kindergarten Classrooms?

Results from the teacher survey suggest that TK was different from kindergarten in its first year. TK teachers appear to have responded to the requirement for TK to provide a “modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate” by focusing more on social-emotional skill development and providing more opportunities for child-directed learning. However, teachers still reported experiencing challenges with differentiating or personalizing instruction—another aspect of developmentally appropriate instruction for young children—particularly in combination classrooms. Results presented below represent findings for both standalone TK classrooms and TK combination classrooms, and for both half-day and full-day classrooms.⁴

TK Teachers Focused More on Social-Emotional Skill Development

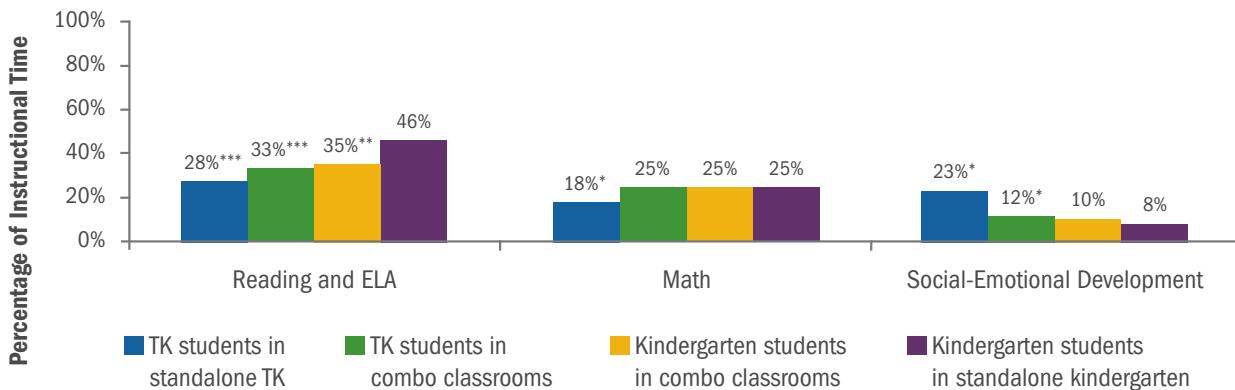
According to teacher reports, students in standalone TK classrooms spent nearly three times as much time on activities to support their social-emotional skill development (23 percent of instructional time) as students in standalone kindergarten classrooms (8 percent) (Figure 1). Teachers in TK combination classrooms also reported that their TK students spent more time on social-emotional skill development compared with students in standalone kindergarten classrooms, although the difference is less dramatic.

In contrast, students in standalone kindergarten classrooms spent more time on academic subjects compared with students in standalone TK classrooms. According to teacher reports, whereas students in standalone kindergarten classrooms spent nearly half of their instructional time on reading and English language arts (ELA) (46 percent) and a quarter of their time on math lessons or projects, students in standalone TK classrooms spent 28 percent of their time on reading and ELA and 18 percent of their time on math lessons or projects (Figure 1). Teachers in combination classrooms also reported that their students spent less time on reading and ELA compared with students in standalone kindergarten classrooms, suggesting that combination classrooms also had a decreased emphasis on these core academic subjects.

³ The survey had a final response rate of 86 percent for TK teachers and 71 percent for kindergarten teachers ($n=151$). For all survey analyses, weights were applied to ensure that the responses we received from our study samples represent the experiences of schools and districts statewide. We present unweighted numbers of respondents in all figures, but the data have been weighted so that results (e.g., percentages) are representative of the state. Nonresponse varied by item; we present the highest n in a series when multiple items are presented together in a single graphic.

⁴ In our district survey, 57 percent of districts reported offering TK combination classes, 35 percent of districts reported offering TK standalone classes, and 8 percent of districts reported offering both. Small and midsized districts were more likely than large districts to combine TK with other grades as a strategy for serving TK students. More districts provided full-day (58 percent) than half-day (41 percent) TK schedules.

Figure 1. Percentage of Instructional Time Teachers Reported Their Students Spent Engaged in Various Content Areas, by Student and Classroom Type



***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

Note: Kindergarten students in standalone classrooms served as the reference group for significance testing. Results include both half-day and full-day programs.

Source: TK Teacher Survey and Kindergarten Teacher Survey (n=158)

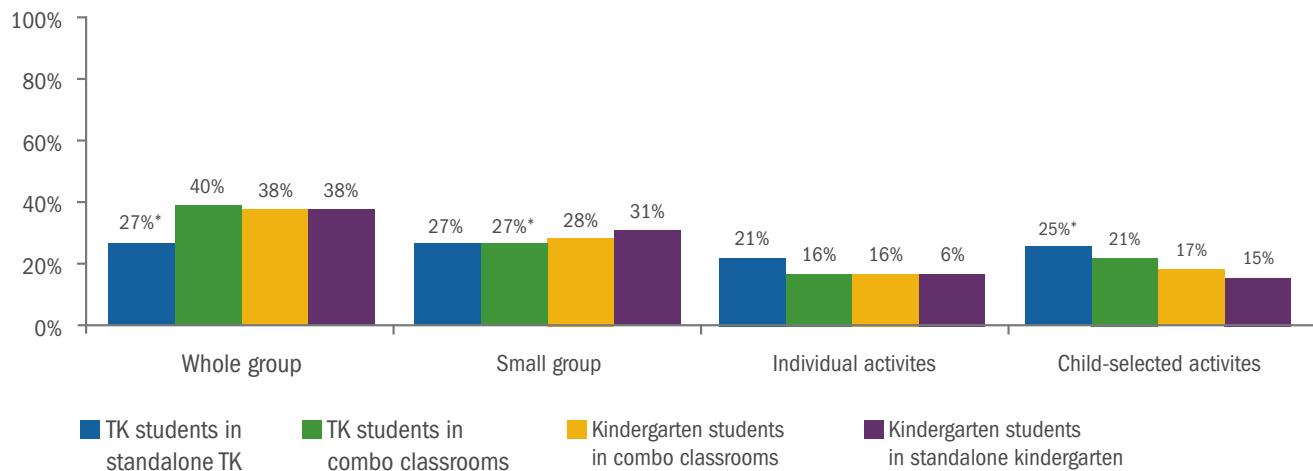
Child-Directed Activities Were More Prevalent in TK

Although exposed to a range of instructional formats and activities, students in standalone TK classrooms spent more time in child-directed activities (25 percent) than students in kindergarten classrooms (15 percent), according to teacher reports (Figure 2). Teacher reports also indicated that students in standalone TK classrooms spent less time in whole-group activities (27 percent) than students in kindergarten classrooms (38 percent). Teachers who received professional development focused on developmentally appropriate practice were more likely to structure class time to provide for child-directed activities. In contrast, teachers who received guidance from the district that “TK should resemble kindergarten” reported that their students spent less class time engaging in child-directed activities.

Based on these findings, it appears that standalone TK classrooms adopted more developmentally appropriate instructional approaches, consistent with high-quality preschool, than traditional kindergarten classrooms. Case studies provide additional insight regarding some districts’ intentions to structure TK in developmentally appropriate ways. In one district, for example, TK was purposefully designed to be a transition between preschool and kindergarten. In the first half of the year, classroom structure and instruction more closely resembled preschool, with more child-directed exploration and centers. Midyear, however, the classroom structure changed: Students sat at tables more often and there were fewer centers. Materials from the centers were still available and children still had a small amount of exploration time, but instruction in the second semester focused more on writing, worksheets, and whole-group instruction.

In another case study district, the difference in instructional formats between TK and kindergarten was particularly dramatic. TK students in one school spent the bulk of their time in exploration, moving around activity centers, engaging in hands-on activities, and learning through play. In contrast, the kindergarten classroom in the same school lacked centers, and students moved primarily between whole-group and small-group activities, with some independent work. The kindergarten teacher said students had very little time for exploration, but she tried to “squeeze it in” once a week.

Figure 2. Portion of the Day Spent in Various Activity Formats in TK and Kindergarten Standalone/Combination Classrooms



* $p < .05$

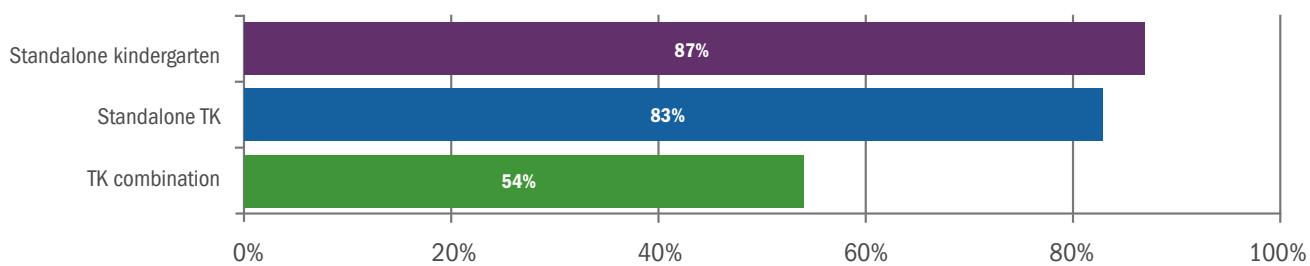
Note: Students in standalone kindergarten classrooms served as the reference group for significance testing. Results include both half-day and full-day programs.

Source: TK Teacher Survey and Kindergarten Teacher Survey ($n=96$)

TK Combination Teachers Find Differentiating Instruction a Challenge

Despite evidence that TK teachers were generally adopting more developmentally appropriate practices to meet the needs of their younger students, teachers in our sample—particularly TK combination teachers—still reported challenges in differentiating instruction according to students' individual needs. Whereas the majority of kindergarten (87 percent) and standalone TK (83 percent) teachers reported that it was possible to differentiate instruction in their classrooms, only 54 percent of TK combination teachers agreed that such differentiation was possible (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Proportion of Teachers Reporting That Differentiating Instruction for All Students Was Possible Given the Range of Needs or Class Size, by Class Type



Source: TK Teacher Survey and Kindergarten Teacher Survey ($n=137$)

In addition, the survey asked TK combination teachers how they differentiated instruction for their TK students. The majority of these teachers said they gave TK students more support to complete activities (70 percent) as well as more time (63 percent). About one third of combination teachers (30 percent) also reported that TK students, to a large or moderate extent, carried out simplified versions of kindergarten activities. Fewer combination teachers (16 percent) indicated that TK students could choose whether they wanted to participate in kindergarten activities.

Summary and Conclusions

Based on surveys of TK and kindergarten teachers included in this study, it appears that TK teachers are adopting instructional practices that are more developmentally appropriate for the younger students enrolled in the program, as intended by the law. Students in standalone TK classrooms tended to spend more instructional time on social-emotional skill development and less time on reading/ELA and math than students in standalone kindergarten classrooms. In addition, students in standalone TK classrooms spent more time in child-directed activities and less time in whole-group activities compared with students in standalone kindergarten classrooms. However, findings in this research brief also point to the challenge of providing differentiated instruction, especially in combination classrooms.

The “Fair Start” Professional Development legislation (SB 837), enacted in 2014, promises to allocate a portion of \$25 million for training TK teachers, who will now be required to obtain early childhood education credits. Given the findings in this research brief, policymakers should consider the potential benefit of using these funds to provide focused training for TK teachers, particularly on strategies for differentiating instruction.

For more information about the Study of California’s Transitional Kindergarten Program, please visit <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/> or contact Heather Quick, Study Director, at hquick@air.org or 650-843-8130.

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About AIR

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AIR’s early childhood development research focuses on evaluating programs and policies, improving professional development, examining accountability and assessment systems, investigating program quality and classroom practices, and translating research to practice to aid young children and their families.



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